

LANDSCAPE AS TRANSFIGURATION

Edward Westermarck Memorial Lecture, October 2015

ABSTRACT

Definitions of what is a landscape vary between a very loose meaning—an environment transformed by human action or subjectively apprehended—and a very narrow one: the pictorial or literary depiction of a piece of land embraced by sight. A third approach will be favoured, based on the study of the process of transfiguration thanks to which a landscape is constituted. Transfiguration deliberately changes the appearance of a site—through its representation or its arrangement—so that it becomes an iconic sign that stand for something else and renders manifest some of its implicit features. Traces of this process will be examined in native Amazonia, among cultures where there traditionally exists neither figuration of landscape nor pleasure gardens.

Keywords: Amazonia, landscape, garden, ecology, transfiguration

It is customary, when asked to deliver a named lecture, to begin with a few words of praise for the person whose memory the lecture series pays homage to, in the present case Professor Edward Westermarck. However, although I did read bits and pieces of the *History of Human Marriage* (1891) when I began to study anthropology and, more recently, the very informative book edited by David Shankland (2014) on Westermarck, I am ashamed to confess that none of the main topics of interest of this most illustrious anthropological ancestor—systems of marriage, the origin of the family and the theory of morality—figures prominently on my research agenda. However, I do favour the comparatist approach that Westermarck advocated all his life, that is, the testing of anthropological hypotheses by checking their explanatory value and scope against empirical evidence, an endeavour which tends to fade away nowadays in favour of what

one may call ‘ethnographism’, that is, unwarranted small-scale inductive generalizations out of very narrow case studies. In this lecture, I will in fact attempt to combine both anthropology as a hypothetico-deductive method and ethnography as an interpretive one to test a new approach to, and definition of, the concept of landscape and to look at its purchase on an ethnographic case, to wit the Amazonian Achuar of the Ecuadorian rainforest with whom I spent some of the most interesting years of my life, but to whom I had not turned back for quite a while. By doing so, I hope to honour another great Finnish anthropologist, Rafael Karsten, himself a student and unruly disciple of Westermarck whom he succeeded in the chair of moral and social philosophy at the university of Helsinki, a noteworthy Americanist and a remarkable pioneer in the ethnology of the Jivaroan tribes I myself studied some 60 years later.

Back to the anthropological question, then: What is a landscape? And more precisely: how are we to define a landscape if we wish to extend the concept beyond the few cultures who have created representations of sites, whether in images or in writing? Do we only find a perception of the landscape in the civilizations where a tradition of depicting it has flourished, or may we use that concept in an anthropologically productive way by detaching it from its aesthetic background? To these classical questions there are two main lines of answers, none of which is really satisfying. The first kind of answers could be called 'extensionist' because they extend the field of meaning of the original concept (to the point where it has little bearing anymore with its specialized definition) as it was construed in Europe from the Renaissance onwards as a pictorial or literary representation of a piece of land. The extensions may operate in different manners. The most common in the social sciences consider landscape as what results from human labour on the environment—open fields in Medieval Europe or terraced slopes in Luzon, in the Andes or in Provence—an objective phenomenon, then, which can be studied everywhere by following the way opened up by human geography ever since Alexander von Humboldt set to this discipline, which he largely created, the mission of studying what he called 'the progressive habitability of the earth'.¹ This meaning of landscape, widely adopted by historians, archaeologists and anthropologists, retains nothing of interest from the initial denotation of the word and imposes moreover a dualist conception of the environment—a physical substratum socialized by human actions—which hardly corresponds to the manner in which most non-modern civilizations conceptualize the places where they dwell. Another, even more trivial, form of universalization of the notion of landscape is the

one which takes the term in its loosest meaning, as the space cognitively and emotionally apprehended by a human subject. And since every human develops a subjective apprehension of space forged by a combination of personal tastes, biographical particulars and cultural upbringing, it results that there are as many experiences of landscape as there are individuals, so that one cannot say much about landscape in general. These manners of breaking with the conventional meaning of landscape are not very productive, either because they do not respect the originality of the notion as it developed initially in Europe, or, on the contrary, because they do not respect the peculiarities of the non-European societies to which they are applied.

By contrast, the other approach to landscape could be called comprehensive in that it densifies the comprehension of the concept instead of extending it. It revolves around the idea of the landscape as a representation of a piece of land seen by a viewer which was put forth by historians of art such as Kenneth Clark (1949) and Ernst Gombrich (1953), who both emphasized the exceptionality of this pictorial genre. The comprehensive approach is particularly developed in France among some geographers and philosophers. It requires that a set of strict criteria be satisfied before one can qualify anything as a landscape or a landscaping scheme: notably the existence of a word, or words, that can be translated as landscape, of literary creations celebrating the beauties of nature, of pictures that have the representation of a piece of land as an exclusive theme, and of pleasure gardens which manifest the desire to emulate aesthetically a pleasurable environment (see, e.g., Berque 1995, 2008; Roger 1997). I do agree that we need explicit clues in this matter, since no one has access otherwise to the sensible world of others: how am I to know that my Achuar neighbour, with whom I am watching

the sand bars emerging from an Amazonian river against the background of a stormy sky, does perceive in what he sees the kind of landscape that filters my own vision, informed as it is by a long familiarity with landscape paintings of different traditions? However, by fixing a priori criteria, this reasonable attitude has the disadvantage of closing the enquiry before it even began: one will certainly be in a position to recognize the predefined criteria, but will one be able to detect a landscaping intention or pattern in the laying out and the use of a site if these criteria are not present?

This is why I chose to embrace a third approach. It is predicated on the idea that, if one wants to exploit the most interesting feature of what the notion of landscape referred to initially, one has to associate this notion less with constituted objects—pictures, gardens, laid out environments—than with the very process by which these objects are constituted into landscapes, a process which may be defined as a transfiguration. When applied to a site, a transfiguration is a deliberate change of appearance at the end of which this site becomes the global sign of something other than what it was globally before it was transfigured, revealing and actualizing in the process some features that it contained potentially. A landscape is above all an object intentionally produced or fashioned by humans so that, among a diversity of other possible uses—utilitarian, recreational, religious—it may function *also* as an iconic sign standing for something else, to wit a portion of a real or imaginary space. Acknowledging this difference between the materials of the composition—vegetation, relief, water, buildings—and the outcome that it produces—whether a garden or a picture—does not imply at all either that this transfiguration leads to an aesthetization—that is, the quest for a result that pleases

the senses—or that it presupposes a marked divide between a physical substratum existing beyond all representation and a cultural *poiésis* that would give it an a posteriori meaning. To produce a landscape, this transfiguration should satisfy three conditions: first, the result of the operation must be deliberately sought after, not be the fortuitous result of an action conducted for another end; second, this operation must not be exclusively utilitarian, that is, aiming at the laying out or the technical improvement of a productive, defensive or dwelling site; and finally, at the end of the operation there must exist a clear conscience on the part of those who have undertaken it of a difference in nature between the elements they had at their disposal initially and their metamorphosis into what we will conventionally define as a landscape. Note that neither an aesthetization nor a great divide between nature and culture are requested here. Transfiguration can present itself under two modalities: one is direct, the transfiguration *in situ*, that is, the laying out of a portion of environment, most commonly under the form of a garden; the other is indirect, the transfiguration *in visu*, and it expresses itself in figurative codes conditioning the representation of landscapes—in pictures or scale models, for instance—structuring, therefore, the perceptual schemes conditioning the manner in which a piece of land will be seen.

How are we to detect traces of this process of transfiguration where neither landscape painting nor pleasure gardens are to be found? To do that, it is necessary to expand the scope both of the transfiguration *in visu*, so as to include in it other forms of iconic representation of the world than those that can be recognized in conventional landscape painting, and of the transfiguration *in situ* so as to include in it forms of creation of ecosystems which do not follow the standards of the art of pleasure

gardens, whether European or Far-Eastern. I will only deal in this lecture with the latter aspect. A lead seems particularly promising for renewing the scope of the transfiguration *in situ*: the meanings attached to subsistence gardens. While it can be readily admitted that pleasure gardens constitute a legitimate expression of an *in situ* transfiguration which leads up to more or less extensive forms of landscaping, there is a tendency to consider subsistence gardens as having no other function than utilitarian. It is far from being the case and this is what I would like to show with examples of Amazonian gardens.

Like many tropical gardens of polyculture elsewhere, Amazonian gardens combine two characteristic features which provide a fertile ground for processes of transfiguration. On the one hand they are swiddens, that is, they render patently visible the relationship between cultivated vegetation and the forest cover which it replaces, a relationship which plays on the variations of scale between the two domains and on complex modulations of the articulation between what is spontaneous and what is controlled. On the other hand, Amazonian gardens usually allow for the coexistence in the same plot of a great number of species and varieties, in such a way that each plant requires individualized treatment. Let us look first at the latter feature. In the case of the polyculture of cultigens propagated by vegetative multiplication, gardening labour appears as an enterprise of pairing and associating singularized vegetal individuals, the assemblage of which must form a harmonious collective. Contrary to the heroic image of the cultivator of cereals, tropical gardeners are composers who marry plants whose cohabitation they favour. This personalized relation derives notably from the fact that the majority of cultivated plants in tropical swiddens are roots that are

reproduced vegetatively, that is, clones which are perpetuated thanks to the individual operation of propagation by cuttings realized by humans. The descent of each plant in a line of genetically identical organisms is thus realized through a continuous relationship with a human who actualizes it periodically. Let us now go back to the first feature of tropical gardens, that is, the fact that they appear at first glance as the substitution of a spontaneous vegetal cover by a vegetal cover controlled by humans. In fact, the relation between the forest and the garden is more complex than what appears to a non-informed observer as the conquest of a natural space by the agrarian civilization. Such an opposition between the wild and the domesticated makes no sense in tropical swidden horticulture for two complementary reasons. First, because the equatorial rain forest has been profoundly affected by human action in the course of millennia so that it is partly anthropogenic: horticulture and silviculture complete each other as much in the techniques they use as in the results obtained. Second, because the garden reproduces at a smaller scale the multi-layered structure of the forest, a stratification which diminishes the destructive effects of solar radiation and bleaching on generally poor soils. Thus, the distinction between the polycultural swidden and the forest in which it was cleared is far from clear cut, on the one hand because the forest can be seen as a macro-garden, on the other hand because the garden can be seen as a micro-forest.

For lack of time, I cannot enter here into the technical discussion of these two propositions which have triggered in the past decades a number of controversies. I will restrict myself to the two following statements. First, concerning the notion that the forest can be seen as a macro-garden. All the studies in ethnoecology carried out in Amazonia in the course of the

past 30 years, including mine, have brought to light different types, often combined, of intentional manipulations by the Amerindians of sylvan species of fruit trees and palms: in the gardens themselves, in the fallows and the former sites of habitat, and in a peripheral area of one or two hours walk around the settlements sites.² This configuration, common to all native Amazonia, and aptly christened 'swidden-fallow agroforestry' by William Denevan and Christine Padoch (1987), is now widely accepted by the scientific community. It constitutes a more likely alternative for defining the anthropisation of the Amazonian rainforest than the claim occasionally put forth by certain researchers that there exist completely anthropogenic forests which have been planted and managed intentionally by Amerindians. As to the proposition that the tropical garden of polyculture imitates the forest from a triple point of view—systemic, structural and functional—an idea initially put forth by Clifford Geertz (1963) and which has also been hotly discussed, two remarks can be made.³ First, that it is unlikely that the populations whose gardens obviously reproduce certain features of the rainforest have attempted to copy deliberately a generalized ecosystem of which they would fully understand the mechanisms and the benefits so as to transpose them to their horticultural system. In fact, Geertz himself never claimed that tropical swidden gardeners had had the intention to reproduce in their gardens the main ecosystemic characteristics of the forest to which he had drawn attention: the high degree of specific diversity, the stratified structure of the vegetation and the internal recycling of nutrients. All that one can say in his wake is that there exists a structural continuum between the forest and the garden since both function according to similar ecological principles. This continuum is due to the fact that in the course

of the several millennia during which tropical horticulturists have domesticated the main cultigens, they have little by little perfected techniques of plant management which did not differ in their principles from those they used in the manipulation of sylvan resources, notably the selective maintenance of certain plants of which they favoured the growth under forest cover. Swidden horticulture and agroforestry are thus two sides of the same process of plant manipulation. This is why, rather than asking oneself if tropical gardens imitate the forest or not, it seems more interesting to consider the relations of analogy explicitly detected and stated by Amerindians between these two ecosystems. Due to lack of time I will only take a few examples starting with that of the Achuar.

Among the Achuar there is little doubt that the forest is perceived and treated as a large garden and that the gardens are planted in such a way as to look like miniature forests in their disposition, their composition and their structure. Let us consider the first point. If the forest takes, in the eyes of the Achuar, the appearance of a large plantation it is not because they cultivate it themselves as a garden, but because they are fully aware that their properly horticultural activities—notably the transplantation of approximately 40 species of sylvan plants into their gardens—have a long-term effect on the phytosociology of the forest in the areas that have been regularly cleared for gardens. The Achuar practice a pioneer horticulture, that is, they do not open new swiddens in recent fallows, but rather in ancient secondary forests which may have been cleared three or four generations ago and which they precisely identify as such by the abundance in them of useful sylvan species. In view of the very low human density and of the very scattered habitat, the influence of this long-term anthropisation on the forest remains

limited, although sufficient to be perceived by a population who is attentive to the distinctive features of the forest that it exploits as much for its food (approximately 50 species are consumed) as for a variety of other uses (pharmacopeia, tools and weapons, firewood, timber) and where the memory of the abandoned sites of habitat is retained over a few decades. Within a radius of approximately 10 kilometres from a house, the forest can be likened to a vast orchard which women and children visit at all times for gathering excursions, for collecting palm grubs or for poison fishing in the brooks and small lakes. It is a domain which is known intimately, where each palm and tree bearing edible fruits is periodically visited during the season. But inasmuch as this anthropisation of the forest, although visible, is not the product of a planned action, the Achuar only recognize it, as it were, in the second degree: the forest has indeed been planted intentionally, but by a spirit. This spirit answers to the name of Shakaim and his main task is to guide men in the labour of clearing gardens. Shakaim is conceived as the husband or the brother of Nunkui, the female spirit who watches over gardens; while Nunkui rules cultivated plants, Shakaim is the gardener of the sylvan plants. As the curator of the forest vegetation, Shakaim visits men during their dreams and signals to them the best sites for opening new gardens since he is in the best position to know where the land is fertile, where the plants he cares for thrive best.

Due to the fact that it is planted and maintained by a spirit, the forest is no more a wild domain in the eyes of the Achuar than their garden is. This is why it is not difficult for them to consider this vegetal continuum from one pole or from the other, and also to see in their gardens miniature forests, that is, plantations similar to those of Shakaim, but of which they have the care and the responsibility.

The resemblance is obvious: as much from the point of view of the diversity and of the intermingling of species—they use over 60 cultigens distributed in 130 varieties—as from the point of view of the stratified structure of the vegetation. The analogies between the two ecosystems are clearly visible, especially because species of sylvan origin are transplanted into the gardens while plants formerly acclimatized in the gardens also subsist in the forest in very ancient fallows that are almost undistinguishable from climax vegetation. It would thus be absurd to take the contrast between the garden and the forest as an opposition between the wild and the domesticated; when the Achuar clear and plant a swidden they replace the plantations of a spirit imitating a garden by human plantations imitating the forest. In fact, both the obvious pleasure that the Achuar derive from multiplying the number of cultigens and cultivars in their gardens and the desire to maintain in them the greatest possible quantity of sylvan species is less the product of a utilitarian imperative than the symptom of a pronounced attraction for vegetal diversity which can be likened to a kind of aesthetic satisfaction in the collection of plants, a common enough disposition among gardeners in other parts of the world. In sum, the vegetal diversity of Achuar gardens, probably one of the highest in the Amazon basin, is not strictly functional and one may consider that it falls within the ambit of a desire to emulate at another scale the floristic diversity of the forest.

The Achuar see cultivated plants as persons endowed with an interiority to whom admonitions and exhortations can be addressed and with whom one can communicate in dreams and by the medium of spells. These vegetal persons live in families, cooperate and enter into conflicts, so that the garden constitutes a micro-society in the literal sense, a collective of leafy people with whom humans must live on

good terms. The plants of the garden are under the jurisdiction of a female spirit, Nunkui, who created them initially, and it is only with her agreement that humans can deal with them and always on a temporary basis. An origin myth relates that after she had first created the cultivated plants, the spirit Nunkui became displeased with the behaviour of humans and made the plants vanish. The modalities of the disappearance of plants diverge according to the variants of this myth among the various Jivaroan groups. In a Shuar version collected by Michael Harner (1972: 70–76), the cultivated plants are swallowed up by the ground, at the same time as the trails opened in the forest. In other Shuar and Aguaruna variants, cultivated plants are transformed into sylvan plants; an Aguaruna variant collected by Brent Berlin (1977) is remarkable from this point of view as it lists precisely the sylvan counterparts of the 22 cultigens mentioned. In Achuar variants of the myth, the cultivated plants do not disappear but their size diminishes by successive stages to the point of becoming minuscule. Whether their destiny is to disappear completely, to transform into sylvan plants or to become diminutive, the plants cultivated by the various Jivaroan groups are always under the threat of the curse of Nunkui. The mode of reappearance of plants after the initial catastrophe is not very explicit. In Achuar glosses, an elusive reference is made to the compassion of Nunkui, who resolves to give back to humans a few seeds and cuttings so that they may plant gardens again. But this act of kindness is coupled with a corollary requirement: humans will now have to work hard to maintain this vegetal inheritance transmitted from generation to generation. Described in a myth, the fading of cultivated plants is an event which, according to the Achuar, can happen again today. The experience of abandoned gardens gives it an empirical foundation which

reinforces the teachings of the myth. For the main cultigens disappear rapidly in the fallows, overcome by the secondary vegetation and by the transplanted sylvan species, a phenomenon well-known to the Achuar who return regularly to the recent fallows to collect fruits. The progressive disappearance of the plants cultivated by humans and their replacement by the plants cultivated by Shakaim are for them a common experience which happens to confirm the possibility of the inaugural catastrophe related in the Nunkui myth.

What are the consequences of this mythical genesis from the point of view of the garden as a landscape? There is no doubt that the Achuar garden can be viewed as a landscape since it figures in miniature a forest which is similar to the one which surrounds it, and is thus in that sense a transfiguration *in situ*, not so much of a piece of land as of a type of ecosystem. But it is a landscape of a particular kind, since the components of this miniature forest—the plants the use of which Nunkui granted to the humans—are under the constant threat of becoming sylvan again, as in the Aguaruna variant of the myth, by changing into their sylvan doubles. The landscape is thus permanently under the threat of disappearing, that is, of reverting to the referent of which it is the iconic sign; it is always on the verge of losing, with its function of sign, its character as a landscape, by merging with what it is meant to figure. Far from expressing an opposition between nature and culture, the contrast between the garden and the forest takes the guise of a relation, threatened by confusion, between a representation and what it represents; a relation of transfiguration *in situ* indeed, but always reversible. In that sense one can speak of a metamorphic landscape, which fits well with the nature of representation in an animist ontology such as that of the Achuar. For the characteristic of an animist ontology

is that it allows metamorphosis, that is, the switch between the point of view of the internal subjectivity of beings and the point of view of their corporeal form. The garden, a space cultivated by humans thanks to the plants of the Nunkui spirit, is an image of the forest, a space cultivated by the spirit Shakaim, who sees in turn the gardens of humans as a forest encroaching on his plantations. Metamorphosis is thus here a game of perspectives: the garden which becomes a forest again in the eyes of the Achuar when it turns into a fallow is, in the eyes of the spirits, a forest which reverts to being a garden.

But there is more. In principle, the garden is a space of consanguinity, and for a number of reasons. First, because it is at the core of the domestic space of each household in which, due to certain properties of the Dravidian kinship system common in Amazonia, the relations of affinity are erased in favour of relations of consanguinity: the house and the garden are ideally consanguine spaces. Second, because the garden is a female space and the manipulation of the kinship terminology and of the system of behaviour results in an association of women with consanguine sociality. Last, because the plants cultivated by women are seen as their children and the Achuar consider motherhood as the consanguine relation par excellence. However, the most common and ubiquitous child-plant in the garden, manioc, is also the most dangerous since it reputedly sucks the blood of humans through its leaves. Manioc thus expresses a predatory disposition which is characteristic not of the sphere of consanguinity proper to women, but rather of the relations of ideal affinity that the men maintain in the forest with other men, during war, and with game animals on the occasion of hunting. Besides, by sucking the blood of human children, the manioc plants merely take revenge for the treatment that their human mothers impose on them, since

women feed their human children with manioc gruel. This reciprocal devouring of human and vegetal children renders the consanguinity of the garden truly paradoxical. Now it is this paradox which is expressed in the garden as landscape, that is, the fact that the miniature image of the forest that it offers is under the permanent threat of disappearing and thus of merging with what it is supposed to figure. For, as a sign, the garden is indeed a material object created and maintained by women, that is, pertaining to domestic consanguinity; but it is also, via the ubiquitous cannibal manioc, contaminated by the values of predatory affinity which reign in the forest that it figures. The garden is thus both fully an iconic representation of a space, the forest, and, at least under certain aspects, a real actualization of this space.

Let us now turn more briefly to the meanings attached to gardens in tribal groups of the Amazonian Northwest, more particularly among the Yukuna, the Makuna and the Miraña.⁴ As among the Achuar, cultivated plants were created there by mythical heroes and they disappeared once before being again accessible and existing in the form of persons, defined as consanguines of the women who take care of them. Among the Yukuna and the Makuna, the mythical genesis of cultivated plants provides the model of their disposition in the garden which moreover reproduces the spatial layout of the *maloca*, the collective house. The latter is organized according to a series of contrasts between male and female (according to the east-west axis), between affines and consanguines, between elder and younger (according to various declinations of the north-south axis), and between ceremonial and domestic spaces opposing the centre to the periphery. The garden is structured according to the same categories: a male front part and a female back part, a ritualized centre and a profane periphery.

Moreover, myths associate coca to a bone, a male element, so that one can see the garden as a human or animal body: in the centre the coca plants form the skeleton, surrounded by the manioc bushes which symbolize the flesh and the blood. In their actual composition, Yukuna and Makuna gardens thus reflect at the same time the mythical operations which constituted them and the organization of social relations in the *maloca*.

The Miraña also plant coca in the centre of the plot in parallel rows, the plant being assimilated to the backbone of the garden, which confirms the symbolism of the skeleton associated with the coca. Furthermore, the Miraña say that each cultivated plant is guarded by one or two masters who watch over it, most of them being ‘punishing’ spirits—generally biting or stinging insects—who castigate humans by sending them diseases if they behave badly in the gardens. Inasmuch as the Miraña garden is a vast metamorphosis of the body of the demiurge, one understands that the latter wishes to retaliate if the plants which he generated are being manhandled, by entrusting this mission to the master spirits of each species: the parallelism is obvious between the garden seen by humans as the body of the creator hero and the human body seen by the creator hero as a sort of garden in which he can let lose his ravaging pests. Lastly, among the Miraña as among the Yukuna and the Makuna, it is imperative to negotiate permission to clear a garden with the spirits of the forest, a task entrusted to the shaman of the local group: for all the elements of the world, all beings, all sites have a master with whom one has to reckon with when one undertakes any activity. Clearing a garden is to encroach on the domain of the spirits who control the sylvan flora, a very risky enterprise and one that can only be undertaken with their consent. Among the Miraña, the parallel with the Achuar is even

more obvious; as Dimitri Karadimas (2005: 341) writes ‘the forest is in fact but a “plantation” under the responsibility of a master’. De facto, the deep forest is a dangerous space, under the jurisdiction of predatory spirits who protect the animals and the trees from which they derive their food and who hunt humans: it can be seen as the garden of animals and some cultivated species are indeed considered as humanized variants of sylvan plants proceeding from the garden of the animals. In sum, when the Miraña clear a swidden in the forest, they destroy part of the garden of animals and it is to placate them that they offer coca to their masters.

It is obvious that in these four Amazonian societies, the garden is always a transfiguration: whether of the forest, of the body of the demiurge or of a microcosmic house conceived as an organism. In all these cases, the relation between the garden and the forest, or between the cultivated plants and the sylvan plants, is not expressed in the form of an opposition between nature and culture, or between the wild and the domesticated, but rather in the form of a series of metamorphoses in which forest transforms into garden, garden transforms into forest, persons transform into plants, divine bodies transform into gardens, human bodies are treated as plants, animals reveal themselves as plants; in short, a permanent movement back-and-forth between macrocosm and microcosm, between types of environment and between ontological categories, a movement which provides an insight into the richness of the conceptions that Amazonian populations have developed to describe and interpret the interactions between biotic communities.

Can one speak here of landscape? If one means by that the transfiguration of a site laid out in such a way that it constitutes an iconic sign of a reality which is distinct from its patent function, then there is no doubt that

these Amerindian gardens are landscapes. The idea of transfiguration is manifest in all cases. Among the Achuar and the Miraña, one can note moreover a narrowing of the gap between the sign and the referent which converts the garden into a very ambiguous landscape. For the Achuar, the plantation of a spirit imitating a garden is replaced by human plantations imitating the forest, but these plantations are under the constant threat of disappearing if the gardeners displease the spirit of the garden, a disappearance which will happen in the end anyway when the garden is abandoned and when the distinction between the image and what it represents disappears. The garden will then have lost its function as a landscape since it will have become again a true forest. In the Miraña case, the plantations of spirits imitating the garden are replaced by human plantations stemming from the body of another spirit, but those who plant them are under the constant threat of seeing their body treated as a garden by the delegates of the spirit, that is, of being dismembered and cut down by diseases following the example of the body of the demiurge. Here again, ambiguity takes over: the initial transfiguration carries the cost of seeing humans transfiguring themselves against their will, with the results that it is the producers of signs who are themselves threatened with becoming signs of what they had figured by creating their gardens.

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The subtle forms of landscape that native populations of Amazonia have managed to create in their gardens offer a conceptual yield far more interesting than what the anthropologists and the archaeologists usually call a landscape, in the loose sense of a subjectively apprehended and anthropogenic ecosystem. And since the type of transfiguration *in situ* that these

gardens realize can equally be detected in other subsistence gardens in other parts of the world where there exists no tradition of literary or pictorial representation of landscapes, particularly in Melanesia and in certain regions of South East Asia, the field of comparative investigation that this perspective opens up seems particularly promising. Proceeding in such a way is also a means of being faithful to the general project of symmetrisation which I see as one of the missions entrusted to anthropology. By symmetrisation I mean the effort to render compatible and treat on an equal footing the cultural features of the observer and those of the observed, so as to escape the situation where the point of view of the analyst doing the comparison encompasses the point of view of the members of the societies that are being compared, or at least sets a convenient point of reference for its evaluation. Why could treating landscape as a transfiguration be construed as a symmetrisation? Because the analytic point of view is not given here *ab initio*, either as the product of a supposedly universal disposition of human nature—the capacity of humans to apprehend a place subjectively or their ability to leave a mark on it—or as the template provided by a Eurocentric concept. The point of view results from the never ending operation by means of which cultural features, norms, institutions, systems of signs, are constituted as variants of one another within a set. The set is here composed of the various man-made ecosystems that fall within the definition of a transfiguration *in situ*, that is, the deliberate conversion of a piece of land into a global iconic sign which highlights some features of the site previously not emphasized. In this perspective, Amazonian gardens are not landscapes because they resemble European pleasure gardens or Japanese gardens, but rather because Amazonian gardens, European gardens and Japanese gardens

are variants of one another within a broader group of transformation which includes also a number of other variants elsewhere, each one of them constituting a particular expression of the process of transfiguration which is constitutive of a landscape.

NOTES

- 1 In a letter to Friedrich Schiller (quoted in Minguet 1969 : 77).
- 2 Among pioneering works on this topic in Amazonia, see Balée (1989), Descola (1994), Frickel (1978), Harris (1971), Hödl & Gasché (1981).
- 3 In 1983 a special issue of *Human Ecology* 11 (1) was devoted to discussing Geertz's thesis.
- 4 For the Yukuna see van der Hammen (1992); for the Makuna see Cayón (2002); for the Miraña see Karadimas (2005).

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